



NATIONAL
MILITARY FAMILY
ASSOCIATION

Together we're stronger

National Military Family Association Operation Purple® Family Retreats

Family Re-integration: Challenges and Solution

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Presentation Overview

- What does research on military families tell us?
- How has the National Military Family Association responded through our *Operation Purple®* Family Retreats?
- What have we learned?
- What are the challenges?
- Where do we go from here?

Who We Are

- National nonprofit organization started in 1969
 - Started by small group of military spouses
 - First victory resulted in Survivor Benefit Plan



About Us

- Founded 41 years ago by military wives concerned about military widows
- Decades of expertise in family issues
- Only organization that serves all Services, ranks, components
- Headquartered in Washington DC area; work nationally
- Use all program work to support advocacy mission

A Different Warrior, A Different Association

The military and its families have changed.

Unlike previous wars, in which most draftees were single, half of today's military is married - with nearly two million children.



Did You Know

- Over 3 million Active Duty and Reserve Component service members
- Over 50% of military members are married
- Over 30% of Active Duty members are married with children
- Approximately 5.8% percent are single parents
- One of largest percentages of military children are between ages of 6 and 11
- 40% of children impacted by deployment are ages 0-5

The Largest Study of the Emotional Well-Being of Military Children and Spouses

- We commissioned RAND Corporation to address three key questions:
 - How are school-age military children faring?
 - What types of issues do military children face related to deployment?
 - How are non-deployed caregivers handling deployment and what challenges do they face?



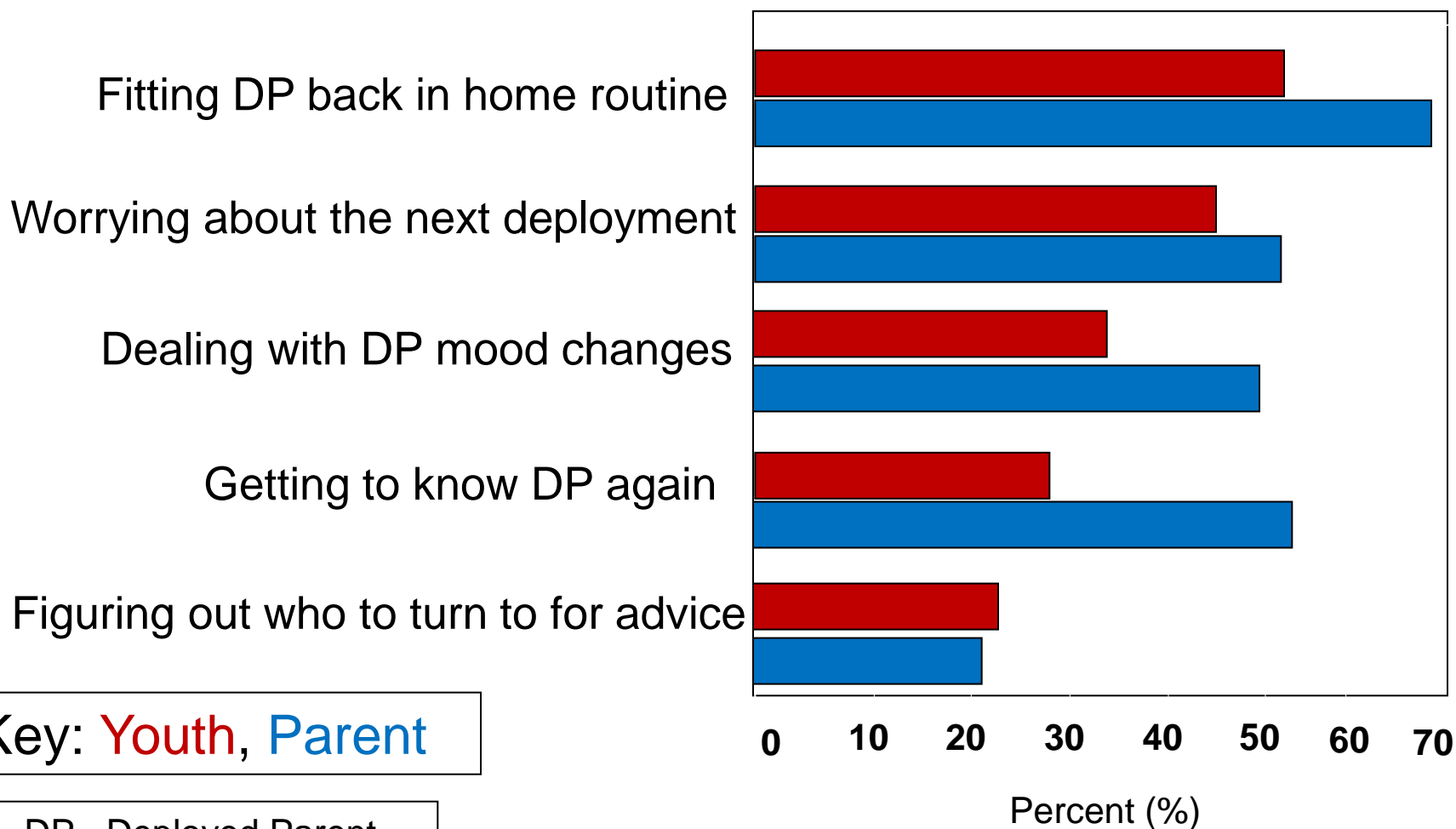
*research findings slides developed by RAND

Research on Spouses and Deployment Shows Some Negative Effects

- Some OEF/OIF studies show that deployment affects marital relationships and spouse's well-being
- Stress during combat deployments may place more strain on couple's relationship
- Recent studies point to a link between spouse's poor mental health and combat-related deployments



Youth and Parent Reported Reintegration Challenges



Older Teens Experienced More Difficulties

- Older teens had more problems during deployment
 - Taking on household responsibilities
 - Taking care of siblings
 - Missing school activities
- ...And during reintegration
 - Getting to know returning parent again
 - Adjusting to returning parent fitting back into home routine
 - Dealing with returning parent's mood changes



Guard/Reserve Caregivers Also Reported Challenges

- More difficulties with emotional well-being
- More household “hassles”
- Fewer community connections/support during deployment
- Greater difficulties during reintegration period

Longer Periods of Parental Deployment Were Associated with More Problems

- As months of parental deployment increased, so did challenges, especially reintegration and caregiver mental health
- Total months away mattered more than number of deployments
- Did not observe differences by current deployment, location, or military role



Non-Deployed Parent's Mental Health Mattered

- Children whose non-deployed parent reported better mental health experienced fewer:
 - Challenges during and after deployment
 - Emotional difficulties
 - Peer and family functioning issues
 - Challenges with academic engagement
- Caregivers who reported better emotional well-being also reported fewer relationship and household hassles



Quality of Family Communication

- Children who reported *difficulties communicating with non-deployed caregiver* also reported more:
 - Emotional difficulties
 - Anxiety symptoms
 - Academic problems
- Caregivers who reported *difficulties communicating with child* reported more:
 - Child emotional difficulties, peer and family difficulties
 - Household and parenting issues

The Association's Contribution to Military Child and Family Well-Being



Operation Purple® Program

- Unique summer camps for children of deployed service members
- Retreats for families reconnecting after wartime separations
- Retreats for families of the wounded



More Parents Deployed Than Ever Before

The war's length and the reliance on the active force has led to unprecedented separations of service members and their children.



The Numbers are Staggering

Since the attacks of September 11

- 875,000 dads and moms have deployed
- 245,000 have deployed twice
- 91,000 three times
- 48,000 four+ times



Result: Historic Levels of Stress at Home

Children's worries due to:

- Media info overload
- Uncertainty
- Sense of isolation
- More responsibility



“When I return, life at home is not the same”

“When I am deployed I envision home life as it was when I left. When I return, life at home is not the same, people and circumstances change constantly. The biggest problem is catching up to the times.”



“Finding a daily balance is
our toughest experience”



“Some of the challenges we face after each deployment is settling back into our normal roles. The children have to remember that Dad is a respected member of the family, not a guest. As a couple we struggle trying to figure out who has what responsibilities. We swing from mom wanting to keep doing it all and not including dad, to mom being tired of doing it all and trying to get dad to do it all. Finding a daily balance is our toughest experience. For mom the struggle is to allow dad back into our lives because he always has to leave and it doesn't hurt as much if we are dependent [sic] on each other.”

Implications for Helping Military Families

- Families facing longer deployments may need targeted support
 - Older teens
 - Girls
- Supports need to be in place across entire deployment cycle, including reintegration
- Some non-deployed parents may need targeted mental health support



Operation Purple Family Retreats

- Outdoor retreats
- Assist families during crucial reintegration period
- Hosted nearly 300 families and 1350 participants since 2009
- Honor families' service



Working Together for Military Families

- National Military Family Association
- Environmental Education Centers
- Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs)
- Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS)

Environmental Education Centers

- National Park or similar location
- Lodging onsite
- Specialized field science educators
- Programming expertise



Military Family Life Consultants (MFLCs)

- Participate with families in activities
- Serve as “educated eyes and ears”
- Facilitate connection with local support resources
- Normalize mental health experience

Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS)

- Key relationships created opportunity to work together
- Shared commitment to supporting military families dealing with challenges of multiple deployments
- Legacy of programmatic excellence
- Strengths-based approach
- Highly skilled clinicians

Operation Purple Family Retreat Model

- Targets reunion and reintegration challenges
- Provides opportunity to reconnect in recreational and educational setting
- Uses team and skill building activities designed to strengthen family bonds
- Enhances mental health support
- Delivers FOCUS activities to enhance family communication and support

Operation Purple Family Retreat Themes

- Stewardship
- Communication
- Environmental Education

Rationale

- ❑ Positive relationship between family leisure and family functioning
- ❑ Family leisure involvement predicts parents' reported satisfaction with family life
- ❑ Parents deliberately plan leisure activities to improve family relationships
- ❑ Presents opportunities for memorable experiences, meaning making, and unstructured family communication

(Agate & Covey, 2007; Bruner, 1990; Hawkes, 1991; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Shaw & Dawson, 2001; Walsh, 2006; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003, 2001)

Rationale

- Physical, physiological, and psychological benefits of being in nature and viewing natural surroundings
- Witnessing and experiencing nature, even in photographs or through a window results in reduced stress
- Natural areas meet needs for tranquility, solitude, and spiritual experiences

(Hartig, Evans, Jammer, Davis, & Garling, 2003; Hartig, Mang, & Evans, 1991; Kahn, 1999; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Moore, 1982; Ryan et al., 2010; Ulrich, 1993, 1984; Wilson, 1984)

Return to Family by Getting Away

“Getting away from it all”

Major motivation for seeking experiences

Relaxation & restoration to reintegration

Time away from daily stresses

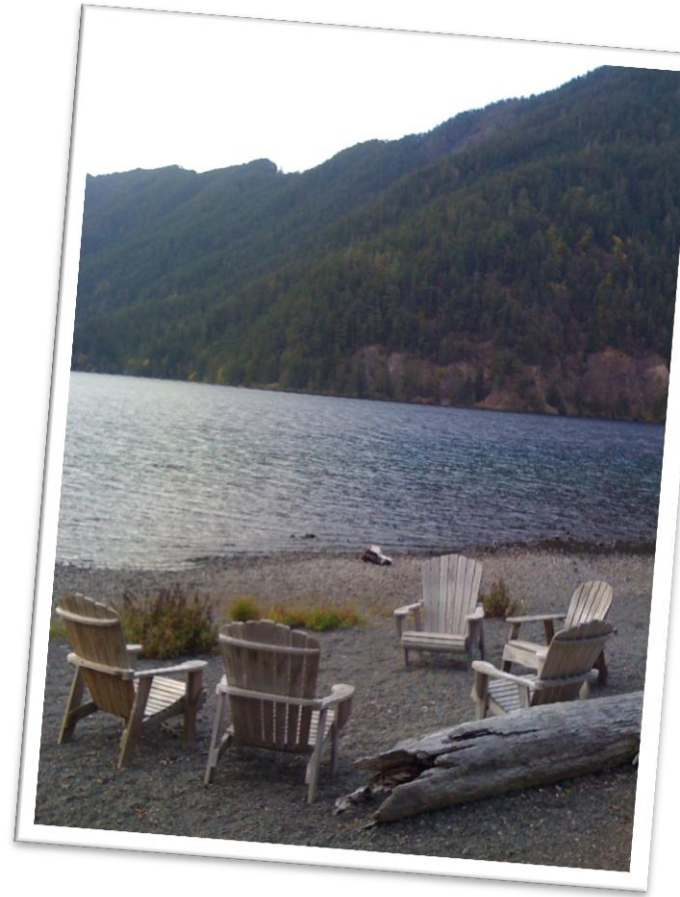
Remembering the small things

National Park setting

Enjoying nature as a family

“Nature as content itself”

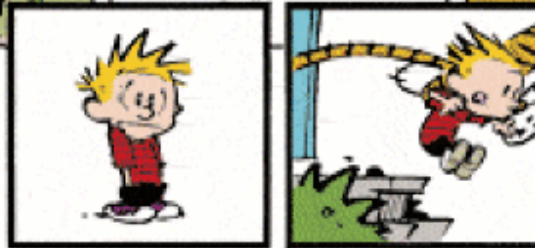
Stewardship education



calvin and Hobbes

by BILLY WATSON
 Art by STEVE GRANITZ
 First published in 1985

OperationPurple
 A program of the National Military Family Association



Family Retreat Resiliency Components

- Community-level games and activities
- Family-level teambuilding
- Family flags
- Parent psycho-education group
 - Emotional regulation
 - Managing deployments
 - Stresses and strengths of military family life
- Family narrative collages
- Pre- and post-surveys

Supporting Family Reintegration

Hugs & handshakes

Small field/ hiking groups

Parent free time

MFLCs

Childcare



Programming Challenges

- Translating skills from the office to camp
- Translating individual and family work into multi-family, large group work
- Meeting needs of families with all ages of children
- Creating “temporary community”
- Making skills applicable & relevant—at camp and back at home
- “Brief intervention format”—make everything purposeful

Retreat Program Evaluation

- Pre-retreat surveys help parents to think about goals for the retreat
- Assessment of family functioning
- Post-retreat surveys allow parents and children to reflect on changes in communication and cohesion
- Evaluative comments assist in program improvement at subsequent retreats

Selecting Resiliency Skills for Retreat Format



Inclusion of deployment stress education and developmental guidance

Utilizing parent group to set goals for the retreat experience and beyond

Helping parents to think about emotional regulation and how it affects communication

Family Collages

- Sharing their stories
 - With family members and other families
- Narrative themes
 - Life during deployment
 - Back home together again
 - Hopes and dreams for the future
- Meaning making
- Naming experiences—both positive and negative
- Looking ahead to the future



Family Collages





Thank you!
www.militaryfamily.org

For more information on RAND
research:

Views from the Homefront

www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9568/index1.html

Thank you for your support of military families!

